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**Russians, Rockets and the  
Santa Ana River**

*A closed weapons plant in the Chino Hills may be leaking hazardous chemicals into the Santa Ana River*

by Michael Collins

Fred Sharp thought it was funny the time his son brought home 20 rounds of machine-gun ammo he had found in his Chino Hills neighborhood. But Sharp, a Vietnam vet and bomb expert, was less amused on March 14, 1999, when a neighbor pointed out an odd-looking metal egg in a vacant lot. It was a grenade—with the pin missing. Soon the Fire Department's arson unit arrived to blow it up.

Sharp lives in one of the hottest new cities in Southern California, a burgeoning bedroom community where luxurious tract homes sell for a tidy \$700,000. Many residents are unaware of the Cold War legacy hidden high in the local hills—one that includes radioactive and chemical contamination, in addition to countless undetonated munitions. They are the products of a clandestine 800-acre complex that operated for nearly 40 years before it was closed in 1995 by Aerojet General, a Sacramento-based military-industrial giant.



Photo by Heather Swaim

Surrounded by barbed wire and virtually unscaleable cliffs, the Aerojet site is near the juncture of Los Angeles, Orange and San Bernardino counties. There, the firm detonated mustard- and tear-gas weapons, exploded depleted uranium-tipped projectiles, and produced a galaxy of bombs and munitions. The depleted uranium on the projectiles, which were deployed as tank-busters in the Gulf War and Kosovo, is linked to bone cancer and kidney disease and has a half-life of 4.468 billion years. Two years ago, the Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute noted

"possible relationships between depleted uranium and neurological, immunological, carcinogenic, genotoxic and mutagenic effects."

Residents of Chino and Chino Hills claim that chemical and radioactive poisons oozing from the site are damaging their health, even causing cancers. Orange County residents may consider those claims as a warning: there's a small creek that sluices runoff from the Aerojet site into the Soquel Canyon Creek in Chino Hills. Soquel Canyon feeds into Carbon Canyon Creek, moving south through Brea, Placentia and into Anaheim. It discharges into the Santa Ana River near the crossroads of the 91 freeway and Kraemer Boulevard. The Santa Ana is a major source of water for many in Orange County, flowing through Garden Grove, Santa Ana, Fountain Valley and Costa Mesa before dumping into the Pacific Ocean at the south end of environmentally troubled Huntington Beach.

Though linking specific cases of cancer to environmental causes is exceedingly difficult, 58 residents of Chino and Chino Hills have sued Aerojet, alleging fraud, negligence and seven wrongful deaths. They seek compensation for medical expenses, lost wages, lower property values and legal fees for, according to the complaint, "willful, wanton and despicable conduct."

"It's Rocketdyne East," said Jonathan Parfrey, a former Santa Ana activist, now local director of the environmental group Physicians for Social Responsibility. Rocketdyne is the better-known military-industrial complex tucked between the Simi and San Fernando valleys. Residents there blame their sicknesses on cancer-causing chemicals and radioactive pollutants. "But unlike the Rocketdyne situation, the community in Chino Hills is disorganized. Aerojet's classified experiments haven't been scrutinized, and the government has apparently bought Aerojet's [contention] that decades of spraying and exploding death-dealing chemicals can be remediated simply by trucking loads of contaminated dirt off-site."

Now, after the nearly five-year-long dismantling of Aerojet's massive complex, activists and residents are worried that their air and soil have been contaminated by radiation and chemicals. Despite reassurances from the government that a proposed cleanup plan will repair the damage, they point to secretive Aerojet restoration activities, a lack of company openness about chemicals deemed classified, and an outright dismissal by Aerojet of responsibility for some of the toxins found in the area.

Aerojet produced potent and poisonous rocket fuel, including something called a perchlorate compound—a toxic rocket-fuel oxidizer that can lead to aplastic anemia and may cause autoimmune thyroid disease. Over the years, perchlorate and other poisonous substances were dumped into a 350,000-gallon polyethylene-lined pond and a 270,000-gallon unlined sludge pit. According to the state Department of Toxic Substances

Control (DTSC), perchlorate drained into the hills' substrata. The cities of Chino Hills and adjacent Chino both rely on well water drawn in Chino for residential use. All nine wells supplying water to the city of Chino were found to contain perchlorate in a September 1997 sampling by E.S. Babcock & Sons, an environmental laboratory. One well had 21 parts per billion (ppb) of perchlorate; state provisional standards consider 18 ppb a threat to public safety. In a March 29 report, the level of perchlorate in the contaminated wells ranged from 5 ppb to 17.5 ppb, according to Dr. Kalyanpur Baliga, senior sanitary engineer at the San Bernardino district office of the California Department of Health Services (DHS) Drinking Water Division. Baliga said that these water wells are taken out of service during periods when perchlorate readings are found to exceed the legally defined "safe" limits. State officials note that it's possible that the perchlorate contamination came from a source other than Aerojet.

Rosemary Younts, senior vice president of communications for Aerojet, said the company is committed to cleaning up the plant. "I will tell you that we do not intend to leave that [site] until it is clean," she said. "We've reported on and evaluated all the data collected and are ready to proceed with cleanup."

This task recently got more complicated. "Explosive chemicals have also been found in ground water at two locations," said Christine Brown, the DTSC's project manager for the facility, at a Chino Hills public hearing in May 1999. "That water eventually ends up in a creek that goes . . . into the Santa Ana River," which supplies two million Orange County residents with 75 percent of their water.

At the Aerojet site itself, dioxin, lead, perchlorate, and the incendiary chemicals RDX and HMX were found, according to a 1999 DTSC report. Perchlorate was detected at 887 ppb, nearly 50 times the allowable government limit for ground water, 42 feet below the surface. In an "open-burn" pit, RDX "was found to be 1,110 ppb, which exceeds its munition health advisory, which is 400 ppb for an adult," the report stated.

Don Vanderkar, Aerojet's director of environmental restoration at the facility, repeatedly has assured residents that they are not in danger. "The activities of Aerojet [have] not affected surface water and ground water and certainly not your drinking supply," he publicly stated last year, days after DTSC's accounting of the company's sludge slopping into streams leading to the Santa Ana River.

Despite that finding, neither DTSC nor DHS has asked the Orange County Water District (OCWD) to test for Aerojet contaminants; district officials in Fountain Valley said they knew nothing about the Chino Hills site and "were having trouble locating it on a map."

An OCWD official said the district doesn't test for the explosive

chemicals HMX and RDX—indeed, HMX isn't in the OCWD data base and the federal Environmental Protection Agency is still developing a test for RDX. While the official said perchlorate has been found in "trace amounts," he pointed out that the district tests water at the base of the Prado Dam in Riverside County and at the Santa Ana River at the Imperial Highway juncture in Anaheim Hills; both sites are miles upstream from where state officials figure Aerojet toxins are entering the river from Carbon Canyon Creek.

Since Aerojet received the DTSC's approval to begin dismantling the facility in 1995, some 364 tons of soil tainted with perchlorate have already been hauled away, according to geoscientist Joseph Bahde, who works for McLaren/ Hart, an Irvine-based environmental contractor brought in by Aerojet. The company awaits state approval for removing additional contaminants. Bahde explained that 10 areas require remediation because of explosive chemicals, ordnance, ordnance fragments and tear gas left at the facility. Other details of the cleanup of the Aerojet plant are being worked out by the company and the DTSC.

California Senator Barbara Boxer said she will work to make sure the federal government fulfills any obligations to "ensure Chino Hills is a safe and healthy environment."

"I am extremely concerned about the effect of radioactive waste and other chemical contaminants on our communities and particularly on children, who are so vulnerable," Boxer stated. "There are hundreds of former military-related sites across the country, and we have an obligation to clean them up."

Despite such reassurances, locals are worried. They report that since 1995, Aerojet workers have excavated some of the complex's toxic soil late at night under floodlights visible from the neighborhood below in what residents began to call the "dead shift." Drivers then hauled away the soil through the local residential streets. Karen Miller, who lives near the entrance of the facility, walked her dogs late at night and was often horrified by what she saw. "I would see these clouds of gas or dust billowing from Aerojet, illuminated by floodlights." But what really set Miller off was her discovery that the hauled-off dirt was contaminated with depleted uranium. "I am a witness to the fact that tarped trucks were rumbling through our neighborhood for at least a year and a half," she said. According to Aerojet's Younts, the materials hauled off-site ended up at Envirocare, a licensed dump in Clive, Utah.

According to a DTSC study, the trucking of toxic sludge isn't over. The proposed cleanup will require "an estimated 20 trucks per day for 16 days (308 trucks total) . . . to transport contaminated soil off-site to the nearest rail location."

Aerojet's Vanderkar was grilled about night hauling at a community meeting last year. He responded, "There was no hauling done purposely

at night or otherwise at night except, perhaps, if we had a long workday and trucks continued into the evening after it got dark." He added, "We have heard the concern, and we will make certain that the hauling is done in reasonable hours."

But the trucking of toxic goo is hardly the only worry for residents such as Miller. "We have the rarest forms of cancer in our community," she said. "Two little girls have died and another is about to. These things just don't happen out of the blue."

Kelly Almand, a soft-spoken 25-year-old woman, grew up in the shadow of Aerojet. She used to play in a mucky creek behind her Chino Hills home. Then, at Christmastime in 1983, Almand was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia (AML), also known as acute myeloblastic leukemia. She and her parents recall that three other neighborhood kids were diagnosed with cancer in the same month. And that year, four additional children contracted cancer at her grade level. One boy died, and Almand was admitted to the hospital. Doctors gave her a slim chance of survival and desperately tried to save her with numerous blood transfusions. She ended up missing a year at Glenmeade Elementary School and now has hepatitis C from the transfusions. But Almand survived and is now a party in the lawsuit. Her hospital roommate was a 3-year-old named Amy with liver tumors—she soon died.

Almand, a fragile woman, is at once shaken and angry. "What they were doing there contaminated the water," she said. "Plus, they spewed gas into the air."

During the same period, four adults in her neighborhood also were diagnosed with cancer. "Back then, I didn't see it as a big deal," she said wearily. "I was a tomboy, just getting dirty. But now, as an adult, looking back, I think it's sick. I think Aerojet knew what it was doing. They knew it was wrong, and they continued to do it, and now they are trying to cover it up."

Seven thousand new cases of AML are reported each year in the United States. A primary cause is "exposure to high doses of irradiation," according to the Leukemia Society of America. AML isn't the only rare cancer in Chino Hills. There have recently been three cases of neuroblastoma, a childhood cancer that strikes about 500 kids annually in the U.S. The disease usually strikes children under the age of 5. Three local children have been diagnosed with neuroblastoma, with a little boy dying of the disease in 1996 and another boy succumbing in June 1998 at the age of 7½. Another girl recently had a bone-marrow transplant and is undergoing chemotherapy.

Despite such stories, one recent study dismissed the notion that people living in the Chino Hills neighborhood are contracting cancers at an abnormally high rate. That report, by the Desert Cancer Surveillance Program at Loma Linda University Medical Center, found that cancer

cases increased 61 percent from 1990 to 1996 but that the population had gone up 80 percent during the same period.

Lawyer Michael Bidart is not convinced by the study. His March 1 lawsuit claims that 5,000 pounds of Aerojet poisons annually leached into the ground, percolating "into the water table under the area and into local aboveground water sources that are drinking sources . . . and used for household purposes such as bathing and washing."

Aerojet's environmental record is far from stellar. Two other sites of company factories, in the San Gabriel Valley and Sacramento County, are now designated as Superfund sites, which are contaminated areas targeted for special, high-priority government intervention. Strangely enough, the Chino Hills location is not a Superfund site; Aerojet would like it certified as safe so it could sell the valuable land. Already, major developers have eyed the property and the vacant land around it. The Catellus Residential Group proposed a 270-home development last year, next to the facility. It was to include an 18-hole public golf course and a place for a fire station. The \$17.4 million venture was rejected by the Chino Hills City Council in July 1999 on a 4-1 vote, after community members voiced concerns about school overcrowding and the possibility that excavation work could release toxins from contaminated dirt. And in February, the city revoked a grading permit for a different proposed upscale development: concerns about unexploded ordnance that were raised by the DTSC.

Regardless, the developer, Redlands-based Harvest Development Co., received San Bernardino County's permission to go ahead with its plan to grade 70 acres of land on the northern perimeter of the Aerojet site for a 610-acre project that would construct 205 upscale homes and a golf course.

Despite numerous "hunt-and-peck" and field-magnetometer searches of the area for unexploded munitions, some parts of the facility are so polluted that the explosives had to be left in the ground. In 1996, McLaren/Hart, Aerojet's environmental contractor, commissioned Wyle Laboratories of Norco to sweep the site for ordnance. In one test area, the report noted, "Sweep data indicates the presence of buried metallic objects; however, no excavation to identify was performed because of depleted uranium (DU) contamination." At another test range, "Extensive intrusive investigations were not conducted because of the potential for DU exposure."

Mother Nature also played a hand in making it almost impossible to ensure that the site is free from armaments. Wyle Laboratories found that "sections have apparently undergone a landslide, and if any ordnance contamination is present, it will be located very deep within the hillside." Weirder still is the possibility that animals have been stashing bombs in their own hiding places, according to bomb expert and resident Fred Sharp. For years, Aerojet tested Dragon Tooth mines in the rugged


ravines. Dragon Tooth mines are small anti-personnel mines, high explosives encased in a plastique and canvas covering. The mines were used extensively to carpet-bomb the jungles of Vietnam. Upon landing on the ground, the bombs were activated; a second impact, triggered by a person stepping on it, might blow a leg off. According to Sharp, Aerojet left numerous Dragon Tooth mines in the open to see how they would be affected by the elements. But some of the mines went missing. It was determined that squirrels had made off with the mines and stashed them in their burrows creating a potentially explosive situation if builders use heavy equipment to excavate the area.


"It probably wouldn't hurt a Caterpillar tractor," Sharp says with a laugh, "but it would sure wake them up."

Taking Aerojet to task for its problems in Chino Hills won't be easy, claim activists monitoring the situation. Like most of Orange County, this section of San Bernardino County is filled with business-friendly Republican officials who feel more of a natural affinity to Aerojet than to environmentalists. Besides that, many are terrified by the prospect that the resale prices of their homes could plummet if word gets out in stories like this one.

"Are their values attached to protecting the health of their family, or do they care more about property values?" commented Physicians for Social Responsibility's Parfrey.

"It's been a nightmare living up here," exclaimed longtime resident Carol Dobrikin, who worries that she may never be able to sell her home. But for Fred Sharp, there are more immediate worries than cancer clusters and the deformed frogs with up to six legs that his neighbor's kids regularly find in the creeks near Aerojet. "As the water comes down that creek, more ordnance is going to start showing up downstream," he said. "I just want to know who is going to be responsible for it."

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